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Soapstone Carving Assemblage

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Abstract

Soapstones of varying colours abound in the mountainous and hilly areas of Ghana but its usage in modern Ghanaian sculpture remains rare. The article aims at popularizing soapstone as a suitable raw material for creating soapstone relief carving assemblage sculptures among modern Ghanaian practising sculptors. Through studio-based experimental approach, the article presents three distinct composite soapstone relief carving assemblages mounted on boards for their aesthetic enjoyment. The study revealed that relief carving assemblages could be produced with soapstone without it being necessarily heavy and bulky while maintaining its aesthetical efflorescence and durability.

Keywords: Soapstone, Relief sculpture, Assemblage, Carving, Composite

1. Introduction

Modern Ghanaian sculptors have not yet developed much interest in stone carving. There is, therefore, the need to generate their interest and quicken the pace for the promotion of stone sculpture. In actual fact, natural stone or rocks abound in the country and are noted for their unique shapes and forms that will make sculptural rendition look very appealing. Soapstone also known as steatite is a naturally soft metamorphic rock (Chikore, 2013) that comes in many shades of white, brown, green and other colourful grains running through it. Matching shades of soapstone grains to make sets of sculptures is difficult, for the true colour is not visible until the carving is finished (final decorative treatment given to sculptures to make them attractive). However, they have colourful finishing appeal. It is reasonably easy to carve with gouges and chisels due to its degree of softness. Soapstone takes high polish or wax and gives a wide range of colours and grains. The use of soapstone and its beautiful grains for sculptures has also not been fully exploited by modern Ghanaian sculptors. Wood sculpture dominates in their works as in the case of the entire African continent. This article explores the creation of composite relief sculptural assemblage using soapstone as a major medium and examines its aesthetic appeal.

2. Ethnic Soapstone Sculptural Art in Africa

The earliest cave wall engravings and carvings of stones in Africa give undisputed evidence of artistic ability in the time of the cave dwellers. They designed ambitious compositions including human beings, animals, and plant life (Ross, 2009), depicting a wide range of poses and actions. Wood dominates in indigenous African sculptures (Amenuke, Dogbe, Asare, Ayiku & Baffoe, 1991; Clarke, 2006) due to its abundance on the continent. However, there were indigenous societies of African who showed interest in stone carving. Stone carving of Africa includes the Nomoli figures from Sierra Leone (Figure 1). These are small human figures made of soapstone which are characterized by large rounded heads projected forward from the neck, having protruding eyes, fleshy nose with flaring nostrils and full lips. Figures of this nature were carved by the people who lived in the area before the arrival of the Mendes in the eighteenth century (Philips, 1996). Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, Esie stone carvings (Stevens, 1978) remain one of the unsolved mysteries in the history of Yoruba Art. Esie oral traditions relate that settlers from Old Oyo 'met' the stone sculpture when they arrived in the 15th (or 16th) century (Philips, 1996). An example of Esie stone sculpture is the bejeweled seated male figure with hands resting on his laps and his headdress consisting of a cluster of snail shells (Figure 2). With scarified forehead in V-Shaped multiples of linear forms and his majestic stance depicts him as a royal. It was not only social position that the artists depicted. Dignity, composure, age and authority that characterize the subject of the sculpture are also revealed. In spite of the damages that the figure suffers, the viewer recognizes in the work, the high level of artistic achievement by the Esie carvers. The Esie stone carvings are the most celebrated of all known artistic cultural heritage handed down to the Igbomina people and one of the largest collection of carved stone sculptures in Africa and the world at large (Aleru & Adekola, 2008). They consist of about thousand soapstone sculptures

rendered in human and animal forms (Ngozi & Tabitha, 2014). These figurines were discovered in the 1930s which led to the establishment of a Museum in Esie, Nigeria in 1945.

According to Batten (1966) there are four figures in the Luigi Pigorini Museum in Rome which are reputed to have been brought to Rome from Lower Congo in about 1695. These are very similar to the Mintadi carvings in soft stone made by the Bakongo to act as guardians over graves. The creation of such figures in soft stone was also practiced in Zimbabwe on a large scale. Moreover, C. T. Shaw's 1945 Dawu excavations exhibits found in the collection of the Ghana National Museum shows evidences of artifacts fashioned from stones. Evidently, these are credible examples of existing tangible ethnic soapstone sculptures which are of African origin.



Figure 1: Soapstone sculpture of Sierra Leone.

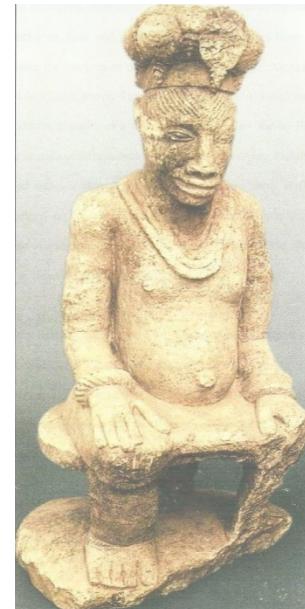


Figure 2: Soapstone sculpture of Esie, Nigeria

3. Conceptual Experimentations

There is an old adage that true recognition of nature does not come until one endeavours to search into something in nature. It is only then one comes to realize the beauty that exists in nature. This is what Zimmerman sums up in his functional theory of resources saying “Resources are not, they become”. This is to say that there is the need to experiment in order to add value to natural endowments and turn them into useful resources. It is factual that an enquiring mind is an asset to anyone who is eager to learn and discover new things. With this mindset, the article takes a studio-based experimental approach in working with distinctively conventional material in African sculpture but experiencing rare usage in modern Ghanaian sculpture despite its profuse availability in the mountainous and hilly areas of Ghana. Creating in-the-round soapstone sculptures is orthodox in African sculptural art but using soapstone in exploring relief carving sculptural assemblage is worth experimenting to establish its compositional effects and aesthetic impulse. The carving experimentations were done in thematic compositional modalities resplendent in the Ghanaian artistic cultural nuances.

4. Tools and Materials Needed

The success of the experimentations was permeated by the use of basic tools and materials for carving. Their technical handling in the execution of the project brought about the works with high aesthetic interests. As witnessed by many scholars (Atherton, 1980; Aribidesi, 1995; Chikoore, 2013), the soft nature of steatite stone allows easy sculpting with wood carving tools including sharp knives. Set of carpenter's saws, jigsaw machine, chisels and gouges of varied sizes and shapes, and sandpaper were used. Materials such as slabs of soapstones, nails, plywood, velvet cloth, varnish and nails were used.

4.1 Experiment 1 (Gossip)

Thematically, the first experiment was centred on creating a three-figure composition of women engaged in gossip using the relief type. Well-shaped fragments of soapstone slabs which formed the composition were then assembled and mounted on a rectangular shaped board in portrait orientation. The procedural steps in making the relief sculpture under experiment 1 are as follows:

4.1.1 Production Process

1. A thematic sketch titled 'Gossip' was produced (figure 3).
2. The sketch was transferred onto the corresponding pieces of soapstone slabs.
3. After marking out on the slabs, blocking was done painstakingly to avoid further fragmentation of the soapstones due to its fragile nature.
4. Detailing was done by chiseling to bring out the desired shapes and forms of the composition.
5. The jig saw machine was employed to cut the outline of the various pieces of the slabs including parts of the negative spaces in the work.
6. The carved stones were sanded and assembled without any bonding technique in rectangular wooden frame made of plywood and battens.
7. The entire composition was varnished (Figure 4).



Figure 3: Sketch for 'Gossip'



Figure 4: Gossip. 50cm x 26cm

4.1.2 Results

The relief sculpture (figure 4) portrays a three-figure composition of women standing in different postures and costumed in headscarves, long skirts and blouses. Two of them have turned towards one direction gossiping about the other whose back is turned towards them. The one whose back is turned towards the other two carries a load on her head with the hands firmly in support. One of the gossipers holds a pot in front of her lower torso while her partner in gossip throws her hand towards their object of gossip – third woman as a sign of rejecting her company.

It is rendered as a jig-saw puzzle carved in planes and which could be reassembled at any given time. Though carved in simple smooth planes, the varying shapes and sizes, breaks the monotony and brings harmony and unity in the entire composition. Their varying postures carry a sense of movement and enlivens the work while the stained pieces of glass forming part of the background support gives subtle contrast that deviates minds of viewers from the work's monochromatic blend of browns. The work is a jigsaw puzzle.

5. Experiment 2 (Chief Executioner)

“Chief Executioner” (figure 5) as titled is an abstract relief sculpture depiction of a chief executioner in Asanteland wearing a traditional ceremonial costume and thrusting a sword in his hand as a symbol of authority. This experiment was centred on a single figure relief composition.

5.1 Production Process

1. Series of sketches were made from which one was chosen, developed and enlarged (figure 5).
2. Based on the thematic sketch of the ‘Chief executioner’, selected soapstone slabs were cut into jigsaw puzzle to fit into the basic outline drawing of the executioner.
3. The chosen figure was transferred onto the pieces of soapstone slabs with a small size parting tool.
4. This was followed by cutting gently and carefully the folds of the cloth, the anatomy of the body and the facial expression. Shallow gouges and chisels were used to carve out the design.
5. As in experiment 1, the carved stones were assembled and varnished.
6. The pieces were finally assembled on rectangular wooden frame with green velvet background.



Figure 5: Sketch depicting ‘Executioner’



Figure 6: 'Chief Executioner'

5.1.1 Results

The work is a barechested male figure depicting an Ashanti executioner in a ceremonial costume at the waist. He wears a hat shaped like the skull of a lion (Figure 6). Around his neck is a chain with four varying knife-shaped pendants. On his right-angled bent left arm is a wristband serving as a charm and amulet to give him spiritual protection against external forces. He holds in his right hand a sword which is a symbol of authority. His posture follows the traditional way of swearing an oath. The figure has been presented in a three quarter view facing the left. It gives an impression of a realistic carving. Carved with a bully face, his eyes open and gaze straight at a target. Proper anatomical treatment was given to the face, neck and other parts of the body. The light colour of the stone used for the body contrasts with the greeny background. The tool marks enhance the surface quality of the work. Implying a sense of rhythm is the flowing movement of the cloth. The work is mounted on a velvet cloth stuck to a wooden rectangular frame.

As the title implies, the work aims at educating the public about some of the negative cultural practices which were been practiced some years back in Ghana. The Akans belief in life-after-death, hence, their philosophy that death is just a transition into the spirit world. Death means rest, rest that is no perpetual. They believe that after rest, life continues. Slaves and servants were killed to go and serve the dead kings and chiefs in the underworld. People were also unfortunately addicted to human sacrifice. At each Addae (a festival among the Asante), criminals and slaves were executed and their heads buried with the chiefs/kings to serve as servants. Traditionally, the performance of this custom is done by the chief's executioner of the Ashanteland. The work measures 113cm X 85cm X 2cm.

6. Experiment 3 (Horn Blowers March)

'Horn Blowers March' is a relief carving that measure 133cm X 82cm X 2cm in approximation. This relief carving portrays the role of horn blowers in Akan society. Horn blowers form part of a Ghanaian chief traditional procession at ceremonies. This composition uses only square shaped soapstones in making the relief puzzle.

6.1 Production Process

A selected sketch (figure 7) based on the subject matter of the horn blowers in procession was transformed onto the surface of soapstone slabs. The drawing was made to conform to the shape of the selected slab. The process of blocking and detailing were employed in carving out the figures in the composition. The same varnish finish was used before the works were assembled on the rectangular frame in landscape orientation.



Figure 7: Sketch of 'Horn blowers March'

6.1.1 Results

The composition comprises of six horn blowers in a procession. Traditionally, horn blowers lead a chief and his elders to a durbar (Figure 8). Two of the horn blowers have hats shaped like calabash with bull horns attached on top. All these figures have been presented in a three-quarter view facing the left side of the composition. The figures are carved showing the upper part of their respective bodies. Four of the horn blowers have their horns turned to the left whilst the other two turned to the right. The two figures wearing the hat are slightly bent forward towards the left side. Their attention is focused on the horns they are blowing. Their clothes stretch from the neck to the knee. This is the traditional way most horn blowers wear cloth. The figures are composed in upright horn blowing positions. The linear grooves made on the surface differentiate between the costume and the figures. Vertical lines which cut across the horizontal lines bring order and harmony in the work. The treatment of the background as against the human figures gives rhythm and dynamism. Simplicity and clarity is observed in the work through the realistic nature of the anatomical treatment of the human forms and the drapery. Variety is achieved through the arrangement of different colourful patches of the stone. The carving was rendered in a simplified realistic manner in such a way that exaggerations were avoided. The background was treated with less tool marks to make the figures stand out. Linear grooves occasionally made on some parts of the surface suggest drapery differentiating between costume and the body (flesh). These linear grooves were also to accentuate the human figures and objects in the composition.



Figure 8: Horn Blowers March

7. Conclusions

It is clear that there remains apathetic preference of stone carving in Ghana despite its abundance in the mountainous areas. The widely used organic materials for sculptures are wood. This has created a wide gap underutilizing readily available natural resources such as stones in carvings. Evidence from the Ghana National Museum shows indigenous stone artifacts of Ghanaian origin which dates back to prehistoric Iron Age. Steatite is a type of soft stone that could be carved to give nice impressions. The study experimented with this stone type in creating composite soapstone relief carvings assemblages without the use of any bonding technique. It implies that the works could be assembled and disassembled as well. In all the three studio experiments, different backgrounds schemas were employed to observe their effect on the compositional structure of the works. The different backgrounds produced interesting visual effects pleasing to the eyes. The study has also shown that carving composite soapstone reliefs could be produced without it being heavy and bulky. This may ease prospective buyers the drudgery of carrying heavy mass of steatite sculpture due to the fragmentation. It is interesting to note also that the aesthetic power of the soapstone relief sculpture is unsilenced by its puzzled fragmentation.

Sculptors should consider varying their mediums to include soapstones in their artistic fabrications thereby making use of the resource to the fullest. Using moderately thin slabs of soapstone would reduce the weight of the artwork and has the tendency of tuning the taste of buyer to soapstone sculpture.

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